



Directorate of
Intelligence

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Impact of Suslov's Death (U)

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The death of Mikhail Suslov, the senior member of the Soviet Politburo and Secretariat in terms of tenure, will enhance Brezhnev's authority in the near term but will increase the chances of a power struggle after Brezhnev leaves. Suslov was the "high priest" of ideological purity within the world Communist movement. His doctrinaire outlook was not unique, but his moral authority within the CPSU was. His death will not produce sudden shifts, but it removes an obstacle to the possible adoption over time of more flexible domestic and foreign policies. [REDACTED]

Standing Within the Leadership

Suslov occupied a special place within the Soviet leadership. In protocol, he ranked second in the Secretariat (behind Brezhnev) and third in the Politburo (behind Brezhnev and Premier Tikhonov), but his influence was as much a reflection of his reputation and history as of his official ranking and position. A party veteran whose service went back to the Soviet Civil War in the early 1920s, he was an "internationalist" who supervised the Baltic purges after World War II and led the crusades against Mao and Tito. He was a politician more interested in the substance than the trappings of power and a guardian of leadership collectivity who worked to prevent the establishment of personal dictatorship under both Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Many younger party leaders may have considered him a relic with outmoded ideas, but he commanded respect and wielded influence to the end. [REDACTED]

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The Structure of Power

Since Premier Kosygin's death in 1980, Suslov's has been the only independent voice on the Politburo other than Brezhnev's. His departure will give Brezhnev a freer hand in personnel appointments. [REDACTED]

Suslov himself need not be replaced at once. There is no fixed number of Politburo members or secretaries, and Suslov's functional responsibilities can be assumed by other secretaries. In recent years, Suslov

increasingly delegated authority to the three junior secretaries whose work he supervised—Mikhail Zimyanin (ideology), Boris Ponomarev (relations with non-ruling Communist parties), and Konstantin Rusakov (relations with Communist parties in Bloc countries). If one of them is elevated to Suslov's supervisory role, it will probably be Ponomarev, the only one who is already a candidate member of the Politburo. Ponomarev has spent his entire career, much of it under Suslov's guidance, directing the international Communist movement. Both his and Zimyanin's outlooks have appeared to be similar to Suslov's. Rusakov has been more closely identified with Brezhnev, for whom he previously worked as an aide. [REDACTED]

It is probable, however, that all or part of Suslov's portfolio will be assumed by senior secretary Konstantin Chernenko, who is already a full member of the Politburo. Chernenko has been more prominent in the general area of propaganda than has Andrey Kirilenko, Chernenko's chief rival within the Secretariat, and he is a logical candidate to take on Suslov's domestic policy responsibilities. Kirilenko has had more experience than Chernenko in dealing with foreign Communist parties, but Chernenko has been increasingly prominent in foreign affairs over the last year. For example, he attended the French Communist Party congress the week after Suslov's death. [REDACTED]

Suslov probably resisted Brezhnev's efforts to push Chernenko forward, and Brezhnev may take advantage of his absence to expand Chernenko's role further, at the expense of Kirilenko. In all but one of the leadership appearances at Suslov's funeral, Chernenko's position was more prominent than that of Kirilenko, who had previously appeared ahead of him in leadership lineups. Chernenko usually appeared to occupy the spot Suslov had held. Vladimir Dolgikh, a junior secretary closely associated with Kirilenko, was also slighted in protocol terms at the funeral. [REDACTED]

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Another leader who may profit from Suslov's death is Viktor Grishin, a full member of the Politburo and head of the Moscow city party organization. Although Grishin has had limited experience in foreign affairs, he was selected to represent the leadership at the Polish party congress last year—a role usually fulfilled by a senior secretary. Grishin also delivered the major eulogy for Suslov, a duty sometimes performed by the person intended to take over the job of the deceased. If Grishin is moved into the Secretariat, it could mean that he is slated to assume some of Suslov's responsibilities. [REDACTED]

The Future Succession

Suslov's departure removes a strong force for stability during the succession that will occur when Brezhnev dies or leaves office. Suslov apparently did not aspire to the top party post, and his personal inclinations, age, and lack of experience in economic management and party organization virtually disqualified him as a successor. He would have acted as a power broker, however, exercising his considerable influence to place restraints on the power of the new General Secretary, while promoting the leadership's common interest in maintaining unity at a time of transition. [REDACTED]

The departure of a key member of the Politburo's "old guard" may increase the weight of younger leaders in succession maneuvering and policy debate. Some leaders associated with Suslov—for example, agriculture secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, the youngest full member of the Politburo—could, of course, suffer. [REDACTED]

Prospects for Policy Change

Suslov's extraordinary concern for the maintenance of internal security and his doctrinaire perspective impelled him to oppose economic reform and "populist" programs at home. His consistent response to consumer and labor restiveness was to urge increased reliance on indoctrination and "vigilance." He evidently argued against greater investment in the consumer sector, which Chernenko and Brezhnev have promoted, and against increased use of wage incentives to spur labor productivity. [REDACTED]

Suslov was a "centralizer" who regarded any devolution of power from Moscow to the national republics with consternation. He had recently urged increased attention to the economic interests of the Russian Republic (RSFSR), perhaps in an effort to bolster Russian nationalism as a prop to the regime. His departure may bring some relief to non-Russian nationalities opposing the priority development of the RSFSR and attenuate the tilt toward Russian nationalism in cultural policy. [REDACTED]

Suslov probably saw Brezhnev's detente policies as a means of creating opportunities for the Soviet Union to improve its strategic position and extend its influence in the world. However, his fundamental antipathy toward the West, minimal contact with non-Communists, and suspicion of Western motives made him skeptical of the benefits of negotiating with the West. He defined the limits of detente narrowly, and there were indications that he was less than enthusiastic about the 1972 US-Soviet summit, trade and arms control agreements between Moscow and Washington, and Brezhnev's trip to West Germany in 1978. He was particularly concerned to limit the flow of Western ideas into the Soviet Union and consequently loath to make concessions in the area of human contacts. [REDACTED]

Suslov was probably the foremost Soviet advocate of doctrinal orthodoxy within East and West European Communist parties. He played a leading role in crushing the 1956 Hungarian revolt and earned the lasting enmity of the Yugoslavs by his early identification with Cominformist sentiment. Although he evidently was more inclined than some leaders to seek a "political solution" to the Czechoslovak crisis in 1968, his position on the question of "proletarian internationalism" appeared to have become increasingly intransigent since that time. Over the last year, he was one of the most outspoken critics of liberalization in Poland and an advocate of a more confrontational line against Solidarity. He very likely played a major role in the recent CPSU offensive against the Italian Communist Party as well. [REDACTED]

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Suslov's attitude toward "national liberation" movements was apparently a mix of two conflicting beliefs, stronger in him than in most leaders. On the one hand, he seemed more willing to confront "imperialism" in the Third World; on the other, he was more worried by the tendency of indigenous national liberation movements to be ideologically impure and independent from Moscow's control. For example, at times he seemed to be less enthusiastic than some leaders in support of the Palestinians. Yet he apparently was in the forefront of those urging Soviet intervention in the Angolan civil war in the mid-1970s. [REDACTED]

Conclusion

Suslov's power and influence waned in the 1970s as Brezhnev's grew. His departure therefore will not have a significant impact on policy toward the West, of which Brezhnev has long been the chief architect. It may be felt, however, in areas where he took a particular interest, notably in relations with foreign Communist parties. In domestic policy, conservatives and opponents of "consumerism" have lost their most forceful and articulate champion, although their voices will still carry great weight in the formulation of policy. Finally, in an age dominated by bureaucrats who would not understand Marx's *Kapital* even if they read it, Suslov's passing leaves the Soviet leadership without an authentic defender of the faith. [REDACTED]

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